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C O N F I D E N T I A L SOFIA 001144

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: SOCIALIST LEADER FAVORS LARGE COALITION; SAYS
SIMEON OUT AS PM; PLEDGES NO IMMEDIATE PULL-OUT FROM IRAQ

REF: A) SOFIA 1134 B) SOFIA 808

Classified By: AMB. JAMES PARDEW FOR REASONS 1.4 B AND D

1. (C) SUMMARY: In a one-on-one meeting with Ambassador on June 27, a confident Sergei Stanishev, Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) leader, laid out his party's views on a future government in anticipation of negotiations to form a coalition. At this point, Stanishev favors a large coalition, including the ethnic-Turkish Movement for Rights and Freedom (MRF) and the current Prime Minister's National Movement for Simeon II (NMSS.) Stanishev was adamant that Simeon cannot remain as PM. He reiterated his pledge to move slowly on his campaign promise to withdraw from Iraq. However, retaining Bulgarian forces as part of the coalition after December is "out of the question."

ELECTION

2. (C) Stanishev said the Socialists did not do as well as expected, but he put a positive spin on the results, pointing out they gained more votes than ever before -- including from young voters. He said the surprise of the election was extreme nationalist group Ataka's strong showing (ref A) which took a considerable number of voters away from the BSP. Stanishev predicted hard negotiations ahead to form a coalition.

COALITION

3. (C) Stanishev repeatedly stressed the need for a stable and predictable government. As the BSP enters coalition negotiations with other parties, Stanishev emphasized that a coalition agreement must be reached quickly because of the EU accession timetable, a tool he can use as leverage in forming the coalition. His strategy going into negotiations is to form a large coalition with the two next largest vote-getters, which will provide a stable structure to allow Bulgaria to finalize preparations for entering the EU -- including amending the Constitution. He says this three-party group would also provide a united front against Ataka. Stanishev was adamant that a coalition which retains Simeon as the Prime Minister is "not possible." Allowing Simeon to stay would lead to rebellion in Stanishev's own party, he said.

IRAQ

4. (C) Stanishev reiterated to Ambassador his earlier comments that withdrawal of Bulgarian troops from Iraq is not a high priority at this point and will take some time to address. Stanishev said he understood the sensitivity of Iraq to the U.S. and did not stress the issue during the campaign, even though it could have won him more votes. Stanishev said he could not give a 100 percent guarantee that Bulgaria would not withdraw before December, but there were other priorities ahead of this on his national agenda. However, after December, staying in Iraq is "out of the question," Stanishev stated.

U.S. MILITARY PRESENCE

4. (C) A BSP-led Bulgaria is ready to begin negotiation of an agreement with the U.S. on the use of military facilities in Bulgaria, Stanishev said. The Socialists have no ideological problems with a U.S. presence in Bulgaria. Stanishev mentioned that the current Simeon government did not do a good job of informing the Bulgarian people about the benefits of the U.S. proposals. However, in a clear indication that basing negotiations will be difficult, Stanishev brought up the appeal of Ataka to nationalist sentiment, noting that his government will have to prove it will protect Bulgaria's national interests in negotiations with the U.S.

COMMENT

5. (C) Stanishev -- apparently feeling confident at this point that he can put together a coalition that makes him PM -- sought to reassure the U.S. that the Socialists see us as

a strategic partner and will make no radical or immediate shifts in Bulgarian policy. In making these assurances, however, he reiterated his intention to remove Bulgarian troops from Iraq before the end of the year -- but not precipitously. As Socialist Party leader, Stanishev made it clear that he will not negotiate an agreement allowing Simeon to stay on as PM. Stanishev's position on U.S. military facilities in Bulgaria suggested that a BSP-led government will be more difficult in upcoming negotiations, as expected (Ref B). All of this should be viewed in the preliminary

context of a winning party that has yet to begin discussions with other parties to form a government.